

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
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R 170955Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1918
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MANILA 2759

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, SHUM, RP
SUBJECT: VISIT TO WESTERN MINDANAO

REF: MANILA 1568

1. SUMMARY: THREE EMBASSY OFFICERS VISITED WESTERN MINDANAO FEBRUARY 4-10. THOUGH THE MNLF IS TO SOME EXTENT ON THE DEFENSIVE, THE MILITARY SITUATION IS ESSENTIALLY STALEMATED. THE PHILIPPINE MILITARY HAS CAPTURED SEVERAL MNLF BASE CAMPS AND IS SUCCEEDING IN KEEPING THE MNLF FROM LAUNCHING MAJOR INITIATIVES. IT HAS NOT, HOWEVER, CAPTURED OR KILLED SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF MNLF TROOPS NOR CAPTURED LARGE QUANTITIES OF WEAPONS; THE MNLF THUS STILL HAS THE POTENTIAL TO REGROUP AND INCREASE THE LEVEL OF FIGHTING IN THE FUTURE. THE MILITARY HAS ALSO MADE LITTLE PROGRESS DEVELOPING RAPPORT WITH THE MUSLIM CIVILIAN POPULATION.

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THE KILLING OF CIVILIANS, LOOTING OF HOMES AND OTHER ABUSES BY THE MILITARY HAVE SERVED ONLY TO ALIENATE MUSLIMS FROM THE GOVERNMENT. END SUMMARY.

2. TWO EMBASSY OFFICERS (POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC) AND THE ARMY ATTACHE VISITED WESTERN MINDANAO FEBRUARY 4-10, STOPPING AT ZAMBOANGA CITY, COTABATO CITY, MARAWI CITY AND

CAGAYAN DE ORO. THIS WAS THE FIRST SUBSTANTIVE VISIT TO WESTERN MINDANAO BY EMBASSY PERSONNEL SINCE SUMMER 1977. THE PARTY WAS BRIEFED BY LOCAL MILITARY COMMANDERS AND HAD THE OPPORTUNITY MEET WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, LOCAL CLERGY AND A VARIETY OF PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS.

3. GENERAL MILITARY SITUATION. THE MILITARY SITUATION IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES REMAINS STALEMATED, THOUGH THE COMPLEXION OF THE MILITARY ACTIONS HAVE CHANGED FROM LARGED UNIT SET-PIECE BATTLES OF THE PRE-CEASEFIRE PERIOD TO SMALL UNIT/TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. THE ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES (AFP) HAS 32 BATTALIONS (APPROXIMATELY 30,000 COMBAT TROOPS) STATIONS IN THE SOUTH WHICH ARE AUGMENTED BY 55,000 CIVILIAN HOME DEFENSE FORCES (CIVILIAN PARA-MILITARY UNITS). THE AFP ESTIMATED THE MNLF TO HAVE APPROXIMATELY 20,000 ARMED TROOPS. BOTH AFP REGIONAL COMMANDERS WITH WHOM THE GROUP SPOKE, ADMIRAL ESPALDON IN ZAMBOANGA AND GENERAL CASTRO IN COTABATO, STATED THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THE MNLF WAS GETTING SIGNIFICANT QUANTITIES OF ARMS FROM ABROAD. THEY CONFIRMED, HOWEVER, THAT ONE MAJOR SOURCE OF ARMS FOR THE REBELS IS THE MILITARY ITSELF FROM WHOM THE MNLF EITHER CAPTURES OR PURCHASES WEAPONS. IN THE ZAMBOANGA CITY AREA THE MILITARY HAS INSTITUTED A "RESOURCE CONTROL PROGRAM" TO RESTRICT THE FLOW OF BASIC COMMODITIES TO THE REBELS. BULK SUPPLIES OF FOOD, MEDICINE AND FUEL ARE MONITORED TO PREVENT THEIR

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PURCHASE BY THE MNLF. THE MILITARY FEELS THIS PROGRAM HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN LIMITING THE ABILITY OF THE MNLF TO CONTINUE TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY.

4. TACTICS. IN THE SOUTHERN MINDANAO COMMAND (SOUTHCOM), ZAMBOANGA PENINSULAR AND SULU ARCHIPELAGO, THE MILITARY HAS ATTACKED IN FORCE ONE MNLF STRONGHOLD AFTER ANOTHER, UTILIZING ITS SUPERIOR FIREPOWER TO CAPTURE MNLF BASE CAMPS. WHILE FORCING THE MNLF TO ABANDON TERRITORY, THE MILITARY HAS BEEN UNABLE EITHER TO CAPTURE OR KILL LARGE NUMBERS OF MNLF TROOPS. WHEN MNLF CAMPS ARE ABOUT TO BE OVERRUN, THE LARGE REBEL AGGREGATIONS BREAK INTO SMALL GROUPS AND EXFILTRATE THE AFP ENCIRCLEMENTS. IN CENTRAL MINDANAO, THE MILITARY IS ATTEMPTING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ITS GREATER MOBILITY TO BREAK UP MNLF TROOP CONCENTRATIONS BEFORE THE REBELS CAN MOUNT OFFENSES. THE MNLF, FOR ITS PART, HAS ESCHEWED MAJOR ACTIONS* PREFERRING TO OPERATE IN SMALL UNITS. IN THE COTABATO CITY AREA,

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MANILA 2759

THE MNLF IS BLAMED FOR A RASH OF KIDNAPPINGS OF
BUSINESSMEN AND ASSASSINATIONS OF MODERATE MUSLIM
LEADERS. THE MILITARY SPECULATES THE MNLF MAY BE SHORT
OF MONEY AND IS RESORTING TO ABDUCTIONS AND RANSOMS TO
PROCURE ADDITIONAL FUNDS.

5. MILITARY-CIVILIAN RELATIONS. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE
CIVILIAN POPULATION AND THE MILITARY IN ZAMBOANGA CITY
APPEAR TO PRESENT NO MAJOR PROBLEMS AT THE MOMENT. IN
MARAWI CITY, RELATIONS HAVE IMPROVED TO A LARGE EXTENT SINCE
THE ASSIGNMENT IN DECEMBER OF A NEW BRIGADE COMMANDER.
IN COTABATO CITY AND ENVIRONS THE SITUATION IS CONSIDERABLY
LESS SANGUINE; THE MUSLIM POPULATION REPORTEDLY IS SUBJECT
TO SEVERE ABUSE BY MILITARY PERSONNEL. MUSLIMS COMPLAIN
OF THREE CATEGORIES OF MILITARY ABUSE: UNWARRANTED BOMBING
AND STRAFING OF MUSLIM VILLAGES AND GATHERINGS, INDISCRIMINANT
FIRING AT NON-COMBATANTS DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS AND
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PROLONGEDSDETENTION OF MUSLIM CIVILIANS BY MILITARY
AUTHORITIES. THE MILITARY ADMITS THERE ARE ABUSES,
WHICH THEY BLAME ON COMBAT FATIGUE AND THE TENSIONS OF

BATTLE, THOUGH THEY CLAIM THESE OCCUR ONLY INFREQUENTLY. MUSLIMS EMPHASIZE THAT THE MILITARY APPEARS SUSPICIOUS OF ALL MUSLIMS, EVEN THOSE EMPLOYED BY THE GOVERNMENT. THE RESULT, THEY BELIEVE, IS A TENDENCY TO SHOOT FIRST AND ONLY AFTERWARDS INQUIRE ON WHOSE SIDE THE VICTIM WAS.

6. ECONOMIC SITUATION: THE MAIN PROBLEM FACING ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS IS THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING. OFFICIALS OF THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION (SPDA) AND THE NATIONAL GRAIN AUTHORITY (NGA) ALL COMMENTED ON THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT MONEY. THE SPDA OFFICE IN REGION IX WAS OPTIMISTIC, HOWEVER, ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OFSA NEW PROGRAM DESIGNED TO HELP THE MUSLIM ECACUEES FROM SULU, JOLO, ETC. THE NGA OFFICIALS SAID THAT OVER ALL, CROPS WERE VERY GOOD FOR 1977 BUT COULD HAVE BEEN BETTER HAD FUNDS BEEN AVAILABLE FOR FERTILIZER AND PESTICIDES. SPDA OFFICIALS IN REGION XII WERE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE PROGRESS OF INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS COMMENTING PARTICULARLY ON THE POLLOC HARBOR PROJECT WHICH IS AHEAD OF SCHEDULE AND WELL WITHIN THE BUDGET.

7. COMMENT: DESPITE GOVERNMENT OF THE PHILIPPINES DEMURRERS TO THE CONTRARY, THE CEASEFIRE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES EXISTS IN NAME ONLY. THE AFP IS, TO A LIMITED DEGREE, ACHIEVING SUCCESS. THE MNLF HAS REMAINED ON THE DEFENSIVE, RESORTING TO TERRORISM IN COTABATO RATHER THAN PLAY TO THE MILITARY'S STRENGTHS BY ENGAGING IN CLASSICAL MILITARY CONFRONTATION. THE MILITARY, HOWEVER, HAS NOT REDUCED TO ANY GREAT EXTENT THE MNLF FORCE'S STRENGTH: WHEN MNLF BASE CAMPS ARE SURROUNDED, CONFIDENTIAL

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THE REBELS DISAGGREGATE AND DISPERSE, TAKING THEIR WEAPONS WITH THEM. THE PEACE WHICH THEN REIGNS IS THUS ONLY TEMPORARY.

8. THE INABILITY OF THE MILITARY TO RELATE TO THE MUSLIM CIVILIAN POPULATION AS OTHER THAN AN ADVERSARY IS PERHAPS THE PRINCIPAL TESTIMONY TO THE GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO DEVELOP SOLUTIONS TO THE MUSLIM REBELLION. STILL PREOCCUPIED WITH CONTROLLING TERRITORY, THE MILITARY IS PAYING LITTLE MORE THAN LIP SERVICE TO THE RHETORIC OF DEVELOPMENT. MAINTAINING THEIR STEREOTYPED IMAGES OF MUSLIMS AS UNTRUSTWORTHY, THE MILITARY HAS CAST ALL MUSLIMS IN THE ROLE OF POTENTIAL ENEMIES. THE RESULT IS THE REINFORCEMENT OF MUSLIM IN-GROUPSFEELINGS AND CONTINUED NON-COOPERATION WITH MILITARY AUTHORITIES BY MUSLIMS.

9. DETAILS WILL BE REPORTED BY SEPAIR.

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